

CHRISTIAN SPORTS STARS

October 18, 1997 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, wayoflife.org, fbns@wayoflife.org) - In the article "A Warning about Professional Sports" (October 17), I mentioned Christian sports players very briefly. The following is a fuller treatment of this subject.

There are professional sports players who are model citizens and good family men and who avoid the general dissoluteness which characterizes their field of endeavor. There are some, in fact, with clear testimonies of faith in Christ. When the Cleveland Indians clenched the American League pennant on October 14, and pitcher Mike Jackson was interviewed, he said, "I give thanks, first of all, to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Jackson's fellow Indian pitcher Orel Hershisier is also an outspoken Christian with a good moral testimony. I admire Hershisier in many ways. He is a brilliant pitcher, a student *par excellence* of and an articulate spokesman for the game of baseball, and he boldly professes the Lord Jesus Christ. He ends his autobiography, *Out of the Blue*, with these words: "But the only thing that's going to count in the long run is not my won-loss record or how much I wind up with in my bank book. ... Read chapter nine again. It's the only one that really counts." (Chapter nine of his book contains the account of how he came to trust Jesus Christ as His Savior.)

It is encouraging to hear such things from the mouths of sports stars, but this does not change the fact that the world of professional sports, generally speaking, is very wicked. It also does not change the fact that there are Scriptural responsibilities which I believe professional players are ignoring.

I do not doubt their faith in Christ (those who hold to a sound Gospel), nor their sincerity. If they maintain a pure testimony and win others to Christ from the sports realm, that is wonderful. In many ways, though, it appears that professional sports players today are disobeying a number of plain exhortations of Scripture.

FIRST, THEY WILLFULLY ABSENT THEMSELVES FROM THE ASSEMBLY. The Lord's plan is the New Testament assembly, and the Lord's people are not to forsake it. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching (Hebrews 10:25). A parachurch Bible study cannot take the place of the church. God has established the church to be the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15), and that is the church which has pastors (1 Timothy 3:1-7) and deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13). What kind of example do the Christian professional players give to young people in the churches who see them out on the sports field on Sunday morning and Sunday evening when Christian people should be in the house of God under the ministry of God's Word? Do they not get the message that one can be a great Christian and ignore the house of God? Professional Christian sports players encourage, by their example, weak Christians to follow them and put sports above the commandments of God.

SECOND, THEY WILLINGLY IMMERSE THEMSELVES IN A VERY SENSUAL ATMOSPHERE FOR MONTHS AT A TIME. Attending a major league baseball game has always been a bittersweet experience for me. I enjoy baseball as a game, but I am depressed by the worldly atmosphere. I cannot imagine immersing myself in that atmosphere for thousands of hours each year. Orel Hershisier might be able to remain pure in such a spiritually oppressive, morally tempting atmosphere, but how many young Christians who follow his example will fall to the great temptations which are part and parcel with the professional sports world and will lose their testimony for Christ? I realize that we all live in the world and are exposed to its influence. As Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 5:10-11, if we are to avoid company with wicked people altogether we would have to go out of this world. That is not God's will. We are in the world to be a testimony for the Gospel. Any man or woman who works a "secular" job is forced to endure things which are worldly. Even so, it does not follow that every job is equally edifying for the Christian. God's Word warns, for example, against giving my neighbor alcoholic drink (Hab. 2:15). This would restrict a Christian from being employed in the liquor or beer trade. I know of a number of Christians who gave up jobs as bartenders and beer salesmen after they were saved. Theirs was a decision based upon the principles of the Word of God. The Bible also warns against being a partner with a thief (Prov. 29:24). This would restrict a Christian from being employed with any company or field involving any type of dishonest gain. Further, the Bible warns against nakedness and indecency and immodesty. This would restrict the Christian from being employed in certain fields such as prostitution or pornography or modeling (if required to dress or perform indecently), etc. What I am saying is that there are jobs which the Christian should avoid

because of scriptural principles. I believe professional sports today might be one of those. “Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11).

THIRD, THOUGH THERE ARE SOME PROFESSIONAL SPORTS PLAYERS WHO HAVE A CLEAR TESTIMONY OF SALVATION, THEY ALMOST ALWAYS FOLLOW THE UNSCRIPTURAL CHARISMATIC AND/OR ECUMENICAL PHILOSOPHY. There might be an exception to this, and I trust there is, but I have never heard of an exception. As a rule, Christian sports stars do not practice biblical separation. They fellowship with anyone “who names the name of Christ” and do not make careful doctrinal distinctions. They do not earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints by exposing false doctrine and marking and avoiding those who practice error (Rom. 16:17; 2 Cor. 6:14-16; Jude 3). These are not obligations which can be ignored. They are not obligations for preachers only. These passages are directed to every child of God.

There are other things which could be mentioned. For example, professional sports players today are sponsored directly or indirectly by beer companies which are responsible for a multitude of wickedness in this world.

(By the way, if there are sports which do not require players to do these things, that is a different matter altogether.)

Can we imagine the Lord’s Apostles smiling upon a first century Christian who desired to join a professional sports team under such circumstances?

In conclusion, **WHAT IS THE MESSAGE WHICH CHRISTIAN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS PLAYERS ARE SENDING TO THE YOUTH IN OUR CHURCHES?** Is it to give oneself unrestrictedly to the Great Commission, to winning souls and building churches throughout the world? I don’t see that. The message which is coming across the loudest to the youth, rather, is that one can have the world and can have Christ, too. One can pursue the self-oriented goals of sports attainment and ignore many of the responsibilities of Christian discipleship and have God’s best blessing, too. From my observation, as the father of two teenage boys, this is the message which is most powerfully emanating from professional sports stars. The boy looks at Orel Hershisser and thinks, “I can pursue my worldly dreams like Orel and can make light of the church and of praying seriously about God using me in His Harvest, and I can give myself wholly to Christ later, after I attain that major league career.” It is a pipe dream. The Bible does not speak of the will of God in the future tense; it is always spoken of in the present tense. The will of God is not something to put off until later; it is something to be DONE today!

“No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13).

“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33).